

ORIGEN AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

BY
EDWARD GEORGE WELTIN

A. B., University of Illinois, 1934

M. A., University of Illinois, 1935

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
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ORIGEN AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The problem of the proper relation of church and state is one that has plagued churchman and statesman alike. From the beginning of Christianity to the present day many answers to this problem have been suggested, but none has yet been found that is wholly satisfactory to all parties concerned. The question was of course particularly acute in the early centuries of Christianity, when the church was more or less an outlawed institution, and in the centuries immediately following Constantine, when it first came into power. During the second and third centuries no Christian thinker could avoid discussing the attitude which his fellow Christians should adopt toward the persecuting Roman Empire, and the political theories expressed by these early writers became the basis upon which others built in the happier days that followed the conversion of Constantine.

Among these early Christian thinkers the most important was Origen, who was born in Alexandria about 185 and died at Caesarea in 254. His theological views, and his efforts to harmonize Christian tradition with Greek philosophy, have been the subject of many studies, but no careful examination of his political views has yet been made. Even so important a scholar as E. de Faye declares, in his fundamental work, *Origene, sa vie, son oeuvre, sa pensee* (Paris 3 vols. 1923-28), that Origen's interests were so wholly centered in the spiritual world that he developed no definite ideas about government and had no appreciation of the problem of the relations of church and state. A study of Origen's writings shows that this remark is inaccurate, and it is the purpose of the present thesis to set forth his views on the Roman Empire, on the attitude that Christians should take toward it, on the political position that the Church should enjoy in it, and on the political Utopia which he would have liked to see established on earth.

Origen could not help thinking about the Roman Empire. His father Leonidas was martyred in 202, when Origen was only 17 years old, and his master Clement then fled from Alexandria; Origen escaped the police only because his mother forced him to remain at home by hiding all his clothes; he later witnessed the devastation wrought in Alexandria by Caracalla in 216;

he fled before the persecution of Maximinus in 235; and he suffered imprisonment and torture during the persecution of Decius in 250. Moreover, Origen knew several parts of the empire well. The first part of his life he spent at Alexandria in Egypt, but after 232 his residence was at Caesarea in Palestine. He had traveled widely in Syria and Greece, and he had even visited Rome. At times he came in contact with the highest officials of the Empire, corresponding with the Emperor, and being invited to visit Julia Mamaea, the mother of Severus Alexander, to explain his religion to her.

Origen's education was the best that his day afforded. He studied, and later taught, most of the branches of profane learning, but he always regarded them merely as aids to a better understanding of Christianity. He was familiar with Greek literature, Greek and Roman history, and classic and contemporary Greek philosophy. He was much influenced by the writings of Philo and the Stoics but especially by those of Plato. Above all, however, he was a student of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, though he used the Greek critical methods of his day in establishing the Biblical text and the Greek allegorical method in interpreting it.

The political conditions in the empire as a whole, in Egypt, and in Alexandria under the Severi and their successors greatly colored Origen's conception of the state. The prosperous empire of the second century had been praised by such pagan writers as Plutarch, Aelius Aristides, and Celsus; but evil days had fallen upon the empire with Commodus and they continued throughout the life time of Origen. Confusion reigned supreme, and all but two of the emperors of Origen's day met violent deaths. A severe economic depression accompanied this political confusion, aggravating it and being aggravated by it. The religion of the empire was being orientalized by the introduction of eastern cults and by the religious syncretism sponsored by the court under the later Severi. Egypt had long been one of the richest provinces in the empire, but after 200 it was impoverished because of the tribute drained away by Rome. Liturgies were widened and made compulsory; and despite severe penalties, tax payers fled while the citizens who remained fell into despair. In Alexandria unrest took the form of anti-Semitic riots, as is shown in the *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*. Even had he not been a Christian, Origen could scarcely have been expected to praise the Roman state as had the writers of the second century or to boast of the beneficence of the *pax romana*.

It was against this background that Origen developed his theories of government. He realized the necessity and value of good government, and he declared that the state was a divinely founded institution used by God in his purposes. In many passages Origen merely repeated Stoic theories regarding the nature of government, natural law, and obedience to the state. Like the Stoics, he declared that the government should conform to natural law--which he also called the law of God--and that if it did not do so, or if it violated the rights of man, citizens might lawfully resist it. If persecution and martyrdom became the only alternative to disobeying God, Christians must accept them. The events of his day, and especially the attempts of various emperors to stamp out Christianity, convinced Origen that the Roman state was violating natural law and therefore did not deserve support according to his Stoic-Christian theories. He declared that in general its rulers were evil, that they ruled harshly and violently, that they were arrogant and covetous, and he criticized their enforced worship of pagan gods, their emperor-worship, and the immoral feasts and games they sponsored. He never defamed emperors by name, but his uncomplimentary references to Maximinus and others are clear though oblique, and he had nothing good to say of any emperor except Augustus.

The Christians were accused by Celsus and other pagans of enjoying the benefits conferred upon mankind by the Roman Empire but of refusing to fulfil the ordinary duties of the citizen. This grave charge received careful attention from Origen in the *Contra Celsum*. The three duties that he discussed especially were those of paying taxes, doing military service, and holding office. He decided that a Christian might pay taxes, but he might not perform military service or hold office. Origen found various passages in the Gospels which supported the first duty, but he explained away the wars of the Jews as allegories, and he declared hopefully that if all men were Christians there would be no more wars. As office holding involved acts of pagan worship, it was out of the question for Christians. And though Origen frequently declared that the Roman Empire stood in no danger of a revolt by the Christians, it is worth noting that he maintained friendly relations with Christians outside the empire. Twice he visited native Christian rulers in Arabia, and while Origen no doubt was interested only in promoting the interests of his religion, it is quite probable that these Arab leaders, like their contemporary, the Christian king Abgar IX of Edessa, regarded the Christians within the empire

as potential allies in their constant wars against Rome.

The heart of Origen's political theory is to be found in his conception of the Christians as a "third race." This idea was not original with him. New Testament writers had spoken of Christians as a "race," and various writers in the second century had called them a "third race"-- third beside Jews and Greeks. Origen's ideas were doubtless influenced also by the spectacle of Jews and Greeks each enjoying autonomy under the Romans at Alexandria. He spoke favorably of the autonomous position of the Jews in Palestine in Persian and Ptolemaic times. He admitted that the Christians were not one "race" by blood, but he insisted that they were one race by a community of interest, community of law, or any other test. This "third race" had its unity as much as the Jews or any other race. In fact, it was the true Jewish race, for the ancient Jews had lost their former position. From these general considerations Origen deduced that the Christians should be granted an autonomy within the empire, and that they should enjoy the exemption from sacrifices and the other special privileges accorded to the Jews by Julius Caesar and his successors. Origen's program was really quite practicable.

Origen had less to say about the exact manner in which this "third race" should be governed. He considered the "church" to be the whole body of Christian believers, and therefore identical with the "third race," and in his opinion it had two types of leaders. The less important of these were the ordained clergy of bishops, priests, and deacons; the more important were the teachers, like himself, who at this time were still a separate order at Alexandria. Origen had little regard for the ordained clergy--though he was ordained himself in middle age--and it is clear that he did not accept the primacy of Rome. In commenting upon the famous passage in the Gospels, he declared that all Christian believers were the "Peters" or "Rocks" upon which the church was founded. The church consisted of all those who accepted the Christian teaching. Not all Christians were capable of understanding the fullness of this teaching, however, and it must therefore be left to the teachers to decide what its teaching should be. They would thus become the true leaders and rulers of the church: like his master Plato, Origen looked forward to rule by philosophers. In practice, however, Origen seemed to identify Christian truth with the teaching of the Alexandrian church of his day.

And finally, Origen had great hopes for this "third race." He looked forward to the day when the whole empire would be converted to Christianity and when a single universal state and a single universal religion would hold sway together. A true Utopia would then arise, in which the benign influence of Christianity would bring an end to war and all other evils. The hearts of the barbarians would be softened, and they would no longer be a menace to the empire. The state would be a perfect expression of natural law, or of the law of God, and all men would therefore be obedient to it. Origen regarded his Utopia as the certain consequence of Christianizing the Roman Empire, and though the state actually set up by Constantine almost a century later differed widely from the one of which Origen had dreamed, nevertheless Origen's ideas were still important in the minds of theologians and political philosophers in the new age. They had a share in preparing the theocracy of the Middle Ages.

VITA

Edward George Weltin was born in Quincy, Illinois, September 21, 1911. He graduated from Quincy College Academy in 1929, and attended Quincy College from 1929-1932, and the University of Illinois from 1933-1935. From the latter institution he received his A. B. in 1934, and his M. A. in 1935. He wrote his master's thesis on the topic, *Perseus and his Struggles with Rome*. From 1935 until 1942 he taught at the Springfield Junior College, Springfield, Illinois, and at Quincy College, Quincy, Illinois. In 1942 he returned to the University of Illinois as a full-time assistant teaching courses in Ancient, American, and European history.

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